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Op-Ed

Hillary Clinton, diplomat in chief

The secretary of State's standing has soared, as her views have remained constant.

By James Mann
 July 8, 2012
 The Los Angeles Times

Two summers ago, in announcing the end of combat operations in Iraq, President Obama told the nation it was time for America to devote itself to problems at home. American soldiers "have met every test that they faced," said the president. "Now, it's our turn."

At first glance, that speech seemed unexceptional. But it left one high-ranking American official privately uneasy: Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton.

By the accounts of former aides, Clinton worried that it might be interpreted overseas as a sign that the U.S. was relinquishing its role as the world's dominant power. And so, eight days later, she delivered a speech of her own: "The United States can, must and will lead in this new century," she asserted. "...This administration is also committed to maintaining the greatest military in the history of the world and, if needed, to vigorously defend ourselves and our friends."

Those two speeches managed to capture both the subtle shade of difference in outlook between Clinton and Obama and the considerable irony inherent in her service as secretary of State.

The irony can be simply stated: Clinton lost the Democratic presidential nomination to Obama in part because liberal Democrats perceived her to be more hawkish than he was on foreign policy.

Her views haven't fundamentally changed. And yet, after 3 1/2 years as secretary of State, she is now vastly more popular than she was in 2008, and probably more popular among Democratic voters than Obama.

This is not to say that the two of them are in competition anymore. Nor are they at odds with each other in the administration's internal deliberations. The recent wave of Clinton profiles, pegged to her announced determination to leave the administration after this year, invariably focuses on how well she gets along with the president, how she has been unfailingly loyal to him.

Such accounts are accurate, but they rarely address the interesting question of Clinton's own ideas and worldview, as distinct from those of Obama. It is as if, because she is working for Obama, her beliefs, deemed of utmost importance four years ago, have become somehow irrelevant.

Many Americans, particularly Democrats, now view the president as distinctly hawkish on foreign policy. He sent more troops to Afghanistan, vastly increased the use of drone aircraft and perpetuated quite a few of the Bush administration's counter-terrorism policies. The changed perception of Obama also reflects the fact that in 2008, antiwar Democrats saw in him what they wanted to see. They failed to pay enough attention when he called Iraq a "dumb war," leaving open the possibility of smart wars, or when he promised to step up the war in Afghanistan, or when he said he would take more aggressive military action in Pakistan.

Nevertheless, on broader issues Obama remains something of a dove. Some of his pronouncements dare to hint that America's role as the world's preeminent power is time-bound. "The United States has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms," he said in his Nobel Prize speech, leaving unanswered how much longer it can or will do so.

Clinton's public pronouncements point more to America's enduring role in the world. She adheres to the basic tenets of U.S. foreign policy since World War II, emphasizing our leadership and alliances. She carries forward the ideas of the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War, when President Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright called America "the indispensable nation."

These days, however, Obama and his aides are discovering that the United States is not always so indispensable. The president goes to international summits and finds that America's requests go unheeded; he sends Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner to Europe with recommendations for how to handle its financial crisis and finds that America's advice is respectfully ignored. American diplomats have discovered the United States has less money available to further its influence in East Asia than China does, and less money to spread around the Middle East than Saudi Arabia does.

Clinton offers what amounts to pep talks aimed at restoring confidence in America's power and influence. In the same speech in which she invoked American leadership, she proclaimed a "New American moment" in which the U.S. should "lay the foundations for lasting American leadership for decades to come." (Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney seemed to borrow that, consciously or unconsciously, when he exclaimed, in his own foreign policy speech a year later, "This is America's moment!")

Clinton's forceful view of American power extends well beyond speeches. Her trip to Asia in the summer of 2010 paved the way for a more assertive U.S. policy toward China. In the administration's early years, she was generally aligned with Defense Secretary Robert Gates and the Pentagon. She did part company with Gates on the issue of Libya — and in that case, she favored military intervention, whereas he did not.

The difference in emphasis between Clinton and Obama may in part be attributable to their different jobs: He's responsible for domestic as well as foreign policy, and she's not. She has to devote a greater portion of her time explaining America to the rest of the world.

But it also reflects their underlying instincts. Obama sees himself as an agent of change, seeking ways for America to adapt to new circumstances. Clinton focuses more on America's continuing strength, in the tradition of Democratic presidents at the peak of U.S. power, from Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman to John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson.

In political terms, Clinton has benefited more from the last four years than Obama has. She didn't lose the 2008 primaries exclusively because of her position on Iraq. The deeper problems were that back then, some voters saw her as merely an agent for Bill Clinton's return, and others viewed as flimsy her claims to experience in foreign policy. With her stint as secretary of State, she seems to have overcome both of these liabilities.

And she has done so while remaining as generally hawkish on foreign policy. Remember the 2007 debate in which a YouTube questioner asked the candidates whether they would "meet separately, without precondition, during the first year of your administration ... with the leaders of Iran, Syria, Venezuela, Cuba and North Korea"?

Obama immediately said he would. Clinton demurred, saying such a meeting could be used for propaganda purposes. At the time, the Obama campaign claimed Clinton had a "Washington salon foreign policy." But Obama must have recognized she was right because (other than a quick handshake with Venezuela's Hugo Chavez) he hasn't been willing to meet unconditionally with any of these leaders. It turns out that in quite a few ways, Obama has changed more than Clinton.

The two former Democratic rivals have worked together surprisingly smoothly. And yet for all that, her assertive views on foreign policy, which Obama and grass-roots Democrats once criticized, have remained relatively constant, while her public standing has soared. Quite a neat trick for someone who, in 2008, was accused of having mediocre political skills.

James Mann, a former Los Angeles Times correspondent, is author-in-residence at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. His latest book is "The Obamians: The Struggle Inside the White House to Redefine American Power."

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